

## Preview

# Solstice sister

Urban shaman Donna Henes celebrates the arrival of winter by trying to stay out of jail **By Marc Ferris**



**MOON UNIT** "The millennium pales in comparison to this," says Henes (above) of this year's solstice. "It'll be amazing."

**D**onna Henes, freelance pagan, is a busy woman. In addition to presenting programs in the public schools, the self-described urban shaman conducts workshops for corporations, writes a syndicated column for several spiritual magazines and holds consciousness-raising meetings at her Tea Garden and Healing Haven in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn. Called Mama Donna by her acolytes, she also proffers private ritual consultations—designed to unblock energy and help participants get in touch with their spirituality—for \$150 a pop. And on Wednesday 22, Henes will host her 25th annual winter solstice celebration, a blowout spiritual event. This time with considerably less drama than last year.

Several brushes with the law during the 25 years she's worshiped nature's seasonal cycles did not prepare the 54-year-old Cleveland native for her ordeal last December 21 at the hands of the NYPD. As Henes

and 32 other winter solstice celebrants chanted praises to the earth goddess around a bonfire on Staten Island's remote South Beach, the police swooped down and arrested her and her merry band of worshippers. The media seized on the story.

"It's a perfect example of testosterone being out of control," says Henes, reflecting on last year's incident. "I mean, what was so threatening about our gathering? There were fewer than 50 people, the majority of them women. We had men with hair down to their asses, babies, two 75-year-old women and some tourists. The cops were fine; it's just the whole Giuliani thing. He's just a serious exaggeration of the species; he's really got superego problems."

Henes and her gang were booked with trespassing because the gathering lacked the requisite permits. But Judge Michael J. Brennan of Criminal Court on Staten Island dropped the charges and sympathized with their cause. "My ancestors, the Celtic druids in pre-Christian Ireland, viewed the winter solstice as a sacred religious event," he wrote in his decision. "Commemoration of this occasion for religious, historical, or educational purposes is to be commended [not punished]."

The judge did stipulate, however, that Henes apply for a permit in the future, so this year she did just that. Unfortunately, there was a little problem—since the solstice occurs at 2:44am on December 22, and Henes again planned to have an open fire, the Parks Department denied her request. (Open fires are verboten in city parks, which close at 1am.) "I filed for all the permits," she says, "but they turned me down, so our hero on a white horse, Norman Siegel [executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union], was able to broker a deal,

and we are now legally allowed to have our celebration and a fire. All we have to do is pay a Parks Department employee \$91 to stand there with a fire extinguisher."

Getting the technicalities waived, said Siegel, "was relatively easy. It was the way things should be all the time. If anything, the Parks Department did the right thing. Last year, the episode was ridiculous. The city didn't look good, and there was some adverse publicity. I would imagine they didn't want a repeat of that. The fact that I told them I was going to be [at the event] helped."

For Henes's part, she says the Parks Department blinked because the solstice happening is harmless; as she points out, it's merely a celebration of the shortest day and the longest night of the year. "We all learned this in third or fourth grade, but we never think about it again," she says. "If we thought about it more often, we'd (a) feel more connected, (b) feel more responsible, (c) see things in more perspective. I think there would just be a whole change of consciousness if people could remember that we are part of this incredible network of energy that is what it is. It's so simple yet so profound."

As for this year's solstice gathering, Henes plans a triumphant fete. Not only is the legal machinery greased, but the cosmic convergences are also favorable. "The millennium pales in comparison to this," she says. "It'll be amazing. It's my 25th annual celebration. I've never missed it, and it's a full moon, which only happens once every 19 years [during the solstice]. The moon is also at perigee, which means that it's closest to the earth. That happens every year, but the moon is not necessarily full when it's at perigee, so the combination of those two forces is going to cause what they call proxigeon tides, which are super major. If there's especially low pressure, there might be tidal flooding, but if not, there will just be fabulous crashing waves."

Full moons, crashing waves... it sounds so nice, who knows, maybe even the mayor might enjoy it.

**Buses to the solstice celebration leave Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn at 12:45am and from the northeast corner of Canal Street and Broadway in Manhattan at 1:15am on Wednesday 22; \$30 in advance, \$35 day of, which includes snacks. For info, call 718-857-2247.**